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ABSTRACT

A summary of recent research shows that more than 11.5 million children lived in poverty in 2001 and likely will experience long-term negative effects of poverty, such as dropping out of high school, compromised physical growth and cognitive development, and reduced physical and psychological well-being as an adult. Improving the home life of children begins with expanding the opportunities and skills of the parents. The research shows that job training and education are fundamental to reducing poverty. The research shows that, while work is often the means by which women exit welfare, education helps them attain self-sufficiency. Attacking poverty by lifting the family's income level through education results in positive effects in parenting and children's school achievement and literacy. Recommendations for welfare policy improvement include the following: (1) remove the current arbitrary 12-month limit for vocational training; (2) eliminate the 30 percent cap on the number of recipients who can count education and training activities as work; and (3) broaden the definition of work to include elementary and secondary education, as well as literacy education, high school equivalency programs, and higher education. (Contains 31 references.) (KC)

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Fact Sheet
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Education and Job Training Build Strong Families

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Education and Job Training Build Strong Families

More than 11.5 million children live in poverty (US DOC 2001a) and likely will experience first-hand what research tells us – that poverty has long-lasting negative effects (McLeod and Shanahan 1996; McLoyd 1998; Reynolds and Ross 1998; Vandivere et al. 2000). Growing up in poverty, particularly if it is persistent:

- Increases the likelihood of dropping out of high school and never attending college;
- Compromises children's physical growth and cognitive development; and
- Reduces one's physical and psychological well-being as an adult.

Improving the home life of children begins with expanding the opportunities and skills of the parents. Through job training and education, parents are prepared for more stable and higher paying occupations that help them rise out of poverty.

Job Training and Education Are Fundamental to Reducing Poverty

Recent research shows that women who leave welfare generally end up in low paying jobs with few benefits, if any (Boushey 2001; Loprest 1999; Polit et al. 2001; Richer et al. 2001). Many welfare recipients lack basic job skills that would make them appealing to employers and help them move out of dead-end jobs (Johnson and Tafoya 1999; Pavetti 1997). Job training and education end this pattern by preparing welfare recipients for higher paying jobs.

The Women in Construction Program (WIC) in Kentucky has been successful in combining training and job placement to increase self-sufficiency and end poverty. Operating since 1995, WIC trains low-income women for highway construction and general construction trades, while offering child care and transportation subsidies during training, and providing support for program graduates. Thomas Boyd (2002) found that WIC graduates earn an average of $10.28 per hour and have low turnover rates. The results for the women who graduate are highly positive: 86 percent feel satisfied with their current jobs, 93 percent feel more self-confident, 92 percent report increased self-sufficiency, and 63 percent believe their family life has improved. These improvements were transferred to the children whose parents say they demonstrate more self-confidence and personal responsibility and show more pride in their mothers' achievements and capabilities.

Research indicates that, while work is often the means by which women exit welfare, education helps them attain self-sufficiency (Deprez et al. 2002; Zandniapour and Conway 2001; Jackson et al. 2000; Loprest and Zedlweski 1999). Higher levels of education bring increased earnings potential and greater employability. In 2000, workers with less than a high school degree had a median income of $18,953, high school graduates earned $27,666, and workers with a bachelor's degree or more had a median income of $53,457 (US DOC 2001c). However, a high school education may no longer be enough. Poverty rates have increased sharply among non-college graduates, making more families vulnerable to poverty (Bennett et al. 1999). A high school education may no longer be enough, however. Poverty rates have increased sharply among children of non-college graduates, making more families vulnerable to poverty (Bennett et al. 1999).

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- The more years of education women complete the less likely they are to live in poverty. Of those living in poverty:
  - 39.4 percent lack a high school diploma, compared to only 13.4 percent of those living above the poverty line;
  - 9.3 percent have earned a bachelor's degree or more, compared to 27.7 percent of the nonpoor (US DOC 2001b).
- Only 29 percent of welfare recipients who left welfare between 1997 and 1999 lacked a high school degree, compared to 41 percent of those still receiving TANF (Loprest and Zedlewski 1999).
- A survey of 5,200 families and individuals served by community agencies in 1999 revealed that those workers who had at least a two-year post-secondary or vocational degree were more likely than others to rise above the poverty line on their earnings alone (Children's Defense Fund 2000).

The Benefits of Parental Education, Training, and Income for Children

Neither reducing caseloads nor mandating parental employment without relieving poverty improves the well-being of children (see Morris et al. 2001). Children in impoverished families are likely to have low cognitive scores, learning disabilities, and other health problems (see Brady-Smith et al. 2001). Attacking poverty by lifting the family's income level through education and training does result in positive effects in parenting and children's school achievement and literacy.

School Achievement

The income and educational attainment of parents are important factors related to children's achievement levels in school. Substantial research indicates that education and income independently and positively affect children in all families, regardless of race and/or class. The disadvantage of children living in poor families with low parental education is tangible and compounded by the quality of their public schools. Schools that have high crime rates, lack of funding for instruction needs, and high concentrations of poor students – factors that are typical in public schools serving poor neighborhoods – perpetuate inequality (see Roscigno 2000).

The income and educational attainment of parents are important factors related to children's achievement levels in school.

Research shows that the higher the family's income, the better children will do on ability measures and achievement scores and the more likely they are to finish high school (see Corcoran 1995; Duncan et al. 1998). Living in poverty during the early years of childhood has the strongest negative effect on children's cognitive ability and achievement (Duncan et al. 1998). In fact, children in families that had incomes of less than one-half of the poverty line scored between 6 and 13 points lower on various standardized tests than children in families with incomes between 1.5 and 2.0 times the poverty line – a statistically significant difference (Smith et al. 1997).

Positive Parenting

Families that are in poverty feel a tremendous amount of financial pressure. This leads to conflict between parents and to harsher parenting techniques (see Duncan et al. 1998). Research suggests, however, that mothers with higher educational attainment are more involved and supportive in their parenting (Jackson et al. 2000). They are more likely to provide their child with an environment that encourages intellectual and emotional development. When faced with difficult behavior in their children, women with higher educational levels and, consequently, a stronger sense of self-efficacy, exhibit a greater sense of control over the situation and have more adaptive parenting strategies (Jackson 2000).

A Literate Home Environment

Children's literacy and language skills are strongly influenced by the quantity and quality of story reading in the home, the presence of adult support for definitions of words and explanations of context, and the expansion of children's vocabularies with new and challenging words and with more complex conversations (Crain-Thoreson, Dahlin, and Powell 2001). Parental education greatly impacts the amount of time that is spent reading to young

children. Among first-time kindergartners whose mothers have a high school degree, 39 percent are read to on a daily basis. In contrast, 59 percent with mothers who have a bachelor's degree or more are read to daily (US Department of Education 1998). Children between the ages of three and five who live in poverty are also read to less frequently than their non-poor counterparts. Sixty-nine percent of impoverished children are read to at least three times a week compared to 85 percent of those living above the poverty line (Chandler et al. 1999).

Policy Recommendations

Raising families out of poverty through the dual efforts of job training and education will improve the well-being of families and children, by strengthening the parent-child relationship, enriching the home learning environment, and providing more opportunities for the entire family's future. Based on these findings, welfare policies should:

- Remove the current arbitrary 12 month time limit for vocational training;
- Eliminate the 30 percent cap on the number of recipients who can count education and training activities as work; and
- Broaden the definition of work to include elementary and secondary education, as well as literacy ESL, GED, and higher education.

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